

## How Greek is the 'Greco-Latin model'?

### Some critical reflections on a key concept in missionary linguistic historiography

The model on which most missionary grammarians depended is that of Latin grammar. Due to the fact that Latin grammar is itself an adaptation and narrowing of Ancient Greek grammar,<sup>1</sup> this model is often dubbed 'Greco-Latin' in current historiography. But how 'Greek' was the 'Greco-Latin model' in the eyes of early modern missionary grammarians? And how tenable is the current historiographical concept of a monolithic 'Greco-Latin model'? One should consider in this context that Latin grammar had always been available in the West since antiquity, whereas the Ancient Greek language was being 'rediscovered'—or rather 're-appropriated'—from the late fourteenth century onwards. This raises the following question: was Greek grammar really seen by early modern missionary grammarians as the fundament on which Latin grammar was built and as largely identical to it? Or could Greek grammar, perhaps, be a separate model from which they could draw inspiration when its Latin counterpart was considered unsatisfactory? In my paper, I will look into this possibility by concentrating on the linguistic work of one seventeenth-century missionary active in Vietnam: the French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes (1591/93–1660). In the grammatical description he prefixed to his Vietnamese lexicon, entitled *Dictionarium Annnamiticum* [sic], *Lusitanum et Latinum* and printed in Rome by the *Sacra congregatio de propaganda fide* in 1651, de Rhodes extensively describes the accentual system of Vietnamese by relying on his knowledge of Greek rather Latin.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, he implies that the Latin model is not entirely the same as its Greek prototype, which leaves us with the option that at least some early modern missionary grammarians did not have a monolithic 'Greco-Latin model' in mind when describing non-European languages. After briefly looking into parallels in linguistic descriptions by other missionary grammarians, I will explore the question as to whether the designation 'Greco-Latin model' can be maintained or it would be preferable to simply speak of the 'Latin model,' given the fact that descriptions of Greek could function as a separate source of inspiration. One could moreover ask oneself whether it is desirable to evoke every time the Greek origins of the descriptive framework missionary grammarians used by speaking of the 'Greco-Latin model,' when in many cases they do not refer at all to Greek grammar in their linguistic works. The central issue of the proposed paper is not limited to the historiography of missionary linguistics, in which it is, however, particularly prominent, but it is relevant to the historiography of linguistics as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> See Vivien Law. *The History of Linguistics in Europe: From Plato to 1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 59.

<sup>2</sup> On de Rhodes' description, see, e.g., already the brief discussion in Otto Zwartjes, *Portuguese Missionary Grammars in Asia, Africa and Brazil, 1550-1800*, Studies in the History of the Language Sciences 117 (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011), 292–93.